

SPECIFICATION

POWER CABLE ASSEMBLY FOR WATER AND
AIR-COOLED WELDING TORCHES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 [0001] Welding torches of the water-cooled type used for TIG (tungsten inert gas), MIG (metallic inert gas) and plasma welding and cutting processes are typically connected to the power source (welding machine) with three or more lines. One line conveys cooling water to the torch head, a second line conveys the shielding gas to the torch head and the third line is used to transfer the electrical

10 output from the power source or welding machine to the torch head. This third line also conveys cooling water back to the circulator reservoir. This third line is commonly referred to as the power cable. With plasma torches, there may be two power cables on each torch. These power cables are made from a flexible plastic tube or rubber hose that defines a conduit. Inside the conduit is a stranded copper

15 cable formed of fine individual wires twisted or braided in a rope-like construction. The copper wires can be bare or plated. The copper cable functions as the electrical conductor for the power cable and is smaller in diameter than the inside bore of the conduit tube or hose so as to allow the cooling water to pass along side the cable, cooling the cable as the water passes thereover and is returned to the reservoir. To

avoid any confusion in terminology, the term "cable" or "cable conductor" will be used herein to refer to the above-described current carrying stranded copper cable.

The term "power cable assembly", when used herein in connection with water-cooled welding torches refers to the cable and conduit combination which carries electric

5 power to the torch and cooling water from the torch.

[0002] The copper cable in the power cable assembly rests on the surface of the inside bore of the conduit and is thus not entirely surrounded by water. This results in a less efficient cooling condition than would exist if the cable were completely surrounded by the flowing cooling water. As power cable assemblies are

10 typically 12.5 to 25 feet in length, a substantial portion of the cable is in contact with the inside surface of the conduit and not with the cooling water. As a result of this relatively inefficient cooling of the cable, the cable must be relatively large in size to maintain the desired level of current capacity. The larger cable also adds bulk and weight to the power cable assembly and the welding torch resulting in less
15 flexibility and added operator fatigue. A smaller cable size could be used if the cable could be more efficiently cooled by the water flowing within the conduit disposed about the cable.

[0003] During normal use of these torches, the torch head is continually being moved up and down and from side to side, as well as twisted, as the operator

20 accesses the weld joint. This constant movement causes the fine copper wires of the

cable to work harden and fracture. The problem is compounded by the fact that the cooling water passing over the copper causes hydrogen embrittlement. The hydrogen molecules from the water interact with the copper molecules embrittling the copper and causing the fine copper wires to splinter and break off. The wire splinters are carried by the cooling water flow to the end fitting on the power cable assembly where they collect and block the water flow through the fitting and cause overheating and torch failure. The use of other copper wire alloys that are less susceptible to hydrogen embrittlement, such as oxygen-free copper, has not resulted in appreciable improvement. It has been found, however, that when the twisted, braided or bunched copper wires are encapsulated with a thin coating of plastic, the current carrying capacity of the copper cable substantially improves. There is more arc stability at very low current levels and the fraying of the copper cable due to flexing and hydrogen embrittlement is eliminated. It has also been found that by utilizing a thin coating on the nature of about 0.010 of an inch, the coating has minimal insulating effect on the wire cable so as not to adversely impact the effectiveness and efficiency of the cooling water. While the individual copper wires will eventually break and fray due to normal work hardening of the copper, the plastic casing will contain the frayed splinters, preventing blockage at the end fitting. Providing the plastic casing with a suitably sized spline or star profile would tend to center the copper cable within the conduit such that the cooling water will completely surround the cable as it flows through the conduit, cooling the entire

surface of the cable and greatly improving the water-cooling efficiency. As a result, a smaller diameter cable conductor can be used, reducing the weight and increasing the flexibility of the power cable assembly.

[0004] In air-cooled torch assemblies, the power cable again provides a dual
5 function. Instead of conveying the cooling water back from the torch head to the circulator reservoir, the power cable used with air-cooled torches conveys an inert shielding gas such as argon to the torch head about the stranded copper cable.

Thus, when used herein in connection with air-cooled welding torches, the term "power cable assembly" refers to the cable and conduit combination which carries

10 electric power and gas to the torch.

[0005] As the inert shielding gas in an air-cooled welding torch assembly flows from the supply tank through the power cable and out the end of the torch nozzle, the gas picks up heat from the copper cable, cooling the cable. While this cooling of the electrical cable by the flowing gas is not as efficient as the cooling effected by
15 the flowing water in water-cooled torches, it does have a cooling effect. As with the water-cooled torches, the efficiency of this cooling effect is adversely affected by the contact between the cable and the inside bore of the outer tube or hose which prevents the gas from completely surrounding the cable as it flows thereby. Thus, the use of a thin plastic casing about the copper cable with a suitably sized spline or

star profile to center the cable within the conduit will also improve the cooling efficiency of the electrical cable in air-cooled welding torch assemblies.

[0006] In addition to providing improved cooling in both water and air-cooled torches, the use of such a casing about the copper cable adds additional electrical insulation about the cable, inhibiting the grounding of the cable during use. High frequency current ("HF") is often used to initiate and sometimes stabilize the welding arc. HF current travels on the surface of the copper cable and is prone to leak or go to ground anywhere along the cable as the cable lays on the floor or workbench. By centering the copper cable in the outer tube or hose of the power cable assembly, the tendency of the HF current to penetrate the outer tube or hose and go to ground would be further diminished in both water and air-cooled applications. Thus, the result of the present invention is a substantially improved power cable for use with both water and air-cooled TIG, MIG and plasma torches.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] Briefly, the present invention comprises a power cable assembly for water and air-cooled TIG, MIG and plasma torches. In water-cooled torch applications, the cable assembly is comprised of a flexible outer tube or hose for carrying cooling water from the torch head back to the circulator reservoir, a copper cable of a smaller diameter disposed within the conduit for electrically communicating the torch head with the welding machine and a thin coating of a flexible plastic

material encapsulating the copper cable. The coating reduces fraying of the wire cable due to flexing and hydrogen embrittlement and contains any wire splinters that may break off during use to prevent clogging of any water passageways or connector fittings. The plastic coating also defines a plurality of radial projections

5 extending therefrom so as to abut the interior wall of the outer conduit so as to position the cable within the conduit such that the water passing therethrough flows completely about the copper cable, cooling the entire surface of the cable, significantly enhancing the water cooling efficiency. In air-cooled torch applications, the plastic coating and radial projections position the cable within the
10 conduit such that the gas passing therethrough completely surrounds the cable to enhance the cooling of the cable. In both water and air applications, additional electrical insulation is provided in addition to the centering of the electrical cable within the conduit to inhibit grounding.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

15 [0008] Figure 1 is a schematic representation of a water-cooled TIG welding apparatus.

[0009] Figure 2 is a cross-section of a power cable assembly of the type employed in the prior art.

[0010] Figure 3 is a sectional end view of a first embodiment of the power cable assembly of the present invention.

[0011] Figure 4 is a sectional end view of a second embodiment of the power cable assembly of the present invention.

5 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0012] Referring now in detail to the drawings, a typical power cable application in a water-cooled TIG welding assembly is illustrated in Figure 1. As seen therein, the power cable assembly 10, to which the present invention is directed, extends between and electrically communicates the welding torch 12 with the welding
10 machine 14 by virtue of the direct connection between the power cable assembly and an output stud 16 on the welding machine through an electrically conductive adapter 18. The inert tungsten gas is provided to the torch 12 from gas supply 20 through lines 22 and 24 via the welding machine 14. Cooling water is provided to the torch from the circulator reservoir 26 via line 28. The water is returned to the
15 reservoir 26 through the power cable assembly 10, a flow-through conduit portion 30 of adapter 18 and fluid-flow return line 32. As the water flows through the power cable assembly 10, it cools the electrically conductive cable disposed therein.

[0013] A cross-section of a typical power cable assembly 100 of the type employed in the prior art is illustrated in Figure 2. As seen therein, the power cable

assembly comprises an outer flexible plastic tube or rubber hose 102 disposed about an electrically conductive cable 104 formed of a plurality of bare or plated copper wires tightly wound into a rope-like pattern. Conventional end fittings (not shown), constructed of an electrically conductive material, are provided on the opposed ends of the power cable assembly 100 for securing the cable assembly 100 to a welding torch at one end and the adapter on a welding machine at the other end. As illustrated in Figure 2, the cable 104 rests against the interior surface of tube or hose 102 so as to define a surface contact area 106 and a water-flow channel 108. As seen in Figure 2, the creation of the surface contact area 106 by reason of the conductive cable 104 resting against the interior surface of the tube or hose 102 prevents the water flow channel 108 from extending entirely about the outer surface of the cable 104, reducing the efficiency of the cooling effect provided by the water. As a result of the relatively inefficient cooling, the cable 104 must be relatively large in diameter, typically about .300 inches in diameter, which not only increases the cost of materials for power cable assembly 100 but adds significant bulk and weight to the power cable assembly and the welding torch, resulting in reduced flexibility and added operator fatigue.

[0014] As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, the power cable assembly 10 of the present invention differs from cable assembly 100 of the prior art in that the conductive cable 34 is of a reduced diameter, typically about .150 - .200 inches, and is encased in a thin coating 36 of a flexible plastic material, such as polyvinyl

chloride (pvc). Coating 36 has a thickness of only about .008 - .015 of an inch to avoid insulating the conductive cable 34 from the cooling effects of the water flow through the power cable assembly 10. Projecting from coating 36 are a plurality of radial projections 38, preferably integrally formed with coating 36. Projections 38 extend
5 outwardly from coating 36 terminating proximate the interior surface of the flexible tube or rubber hose 40 of the power cable assembly 10 so as to space the conductive cable 34 away from the interior surface of tube or hose 40, and preferably to position the cable in substantial axial alignment with the central axis of the outer tube or hose 40. As a result, the water-flow channel 42 within the power cable 10
10 completely surrounds the copper cable 34 such that the water flowing therethrough will cool the entire surface of the cable, substantially enhancing the cooling efficiency of the water and allowing for the use of a reduced diameter cable 34 within power cable assembly 10 as compared to the cable 104 in the prior art cable assembly 100. The centering of the cable within the outer tube or hose 40 also
15 inhibits grounding of the power cable as it lies on the floor or work bench. The encasement of the wound wires comprising cable 34 not only provides additional electrical insulation to further inhibit grounding but also prevents any frayed wire splinters from being carried along with the water flow and occluding the water passageway and/or blocking the downstream end fitting 50 on power cable assembly
20 10, thereby significantly enhancing the life of the power cable assembly.

[0015] The power cable assembly 10 of the present invention used in air-cooled torch applications is of the same configuration as described above except for the end fittings thereon and the fact that the water-flow channel 42 functions as a conduit for the inert gas flowing from the gas supply 20 to the torch 12. Otherwise, the power cable assembly employed in air-cooled applications is the same as that employed in water-cooled torch applications. In both applications, the power cable assembly transmits electrical power through a centrally disposed electrically conductive cable and a flow of fluid (water or gas) about the cable.

[0016] Two embodiments of the power cable assembly 10 of the present invention are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. The difference in the two embodiments is the configuration of the radial projections 38 formed by the plastic casing 36 to center the electric cable 34 within the outer tube or hose 40. Figure 3 illustrates a spline configuration, whereas Figure 4 illustrates a star-like configuration. Other radially projecting patterns could, of course, be defined by casing 36 to space the electric cable 34 from the wall of the tube or hose 40. These and various other changes and modifications may be made in carrying out the present invention without departing from the spirit and scope thereof. Insofar as these changes and modifications are within the purview of the appended claims, they are to be considered as part of the present invention.